Beyond Heresy?
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A recent (2003) best selling book by Elaine Pagels is entitled, *Beyond Belief.*[1] This book focuses on her favorite theme of Gnosticism, and in particular the Gnostic document, "The Gospel of Thomas." Catering to the contemporary rejection of epistemological belief-systems in our culture, Pagels espouses an internalized and subjective religious experience that accords with the Gnostic spirituality that became prominent in the second to the fourth centuries A.D. Although the early Church rejected Gnostic teaching as heretical for its dualistic concepts of the created order and for its elitist categories of subjective knowledge, Pagels disingenuously attempts to tag the early church with oppressively afflicting Christianity with a rigid belief-system codified in creeds. Thereby she argues for a religious experience that is *Beyond Belief*, advocating a return to Gnostic concepts of internalized and subjective enlightenment, which accommodates the "New Age" and "postmodernist" emphases on subjective consciousness and experiential awareness of God.

Pagels reads the mind-set of modern culture very well. Rejecting objectified rationalism and absolutistic belief-systems, modern thought attempts to deconstruct the logical bases of determining truth. The pluralistic opinions and feelings of all persons are considered to be of equal value and weight. Historical and logical criteria for evaluating right and wrong, accuracy and inaccuracy, validity and absurdity, are blurred into oblivion. Suffering, then, from an epidemic of tolerance of egalitarian whims, we are "beyond belief," and soon beyond all the social and moral structures that keep us from anarchy and chaos.

To proceed "beyond belief" is to regress into the narcissistic quagmire of "every man for himself" and the relativistic determinations of personalized, experiential "truth." Every person's opinions and feelings become their own ultimate authority, and every person's "god" is limited to their own cranial cavity or emotive capacity. All sense of community deteriorates. God becomes an antiquated misconception. Truth is individuated and relativized. If anything and everything is "true," then nothing is "true" in any absolute sense. As we travel the road "beyond belief," then we have no basis to determine any idea or thought as inaccurate, illogical, aberrant or heretical.

If we go "beyond belief," then we go beyond absurdity (logically), beyond decadency (morally), beyond anarchy (socially), and beyond heresy (theologically). The latter of these categories is the one that I seek to consider and address in this article. Much of contemporary theological thought (Pagels being a particular example) is freighted with a liberal pluralism that has gone "beyond belief," and thus beyond absurdity (cf. God is dead theology), beyond anarchy (cf. Liberation theology), beyond decadency (cf. Gay theology), and beyond heresy (cf. Oneness theology). But, of course, if we go "beyond belief," then the foundation for determining these categories has been removed, and it is questionable whether these evaluations are valid. Have we arrived at a place where we are "Beyond Heresy?"

Personal illustrations

Approximately one year ago (June, 2003) I wrote a personal letter to a couple, wherein I explicitly noted where their teaching was contrary to Scripture and the historic teaching of the Church. The recipients subsequently made the letter public, and some of the devotees of their school of thought were appalled that I would suggest that their teaching was "heretical." "Who

does he think he is? God?" "Who appointed him to be the 'God-police'?" were some of their surly and sarcastic comments.

The adherents of this particular group consider themselves as "spiritual knowers," and have many similarities to Gnostic elitism, as well as affinities to the so-called "New Age philosophy." When I suggested that they were violating every major doctrine of Christian theology, the violent reactions of their loyal followers revealed their underlying premises that Christians should be "beyond heresy" and engaged in loving acceptance of what others have come to "know." Ironically, their violent reactions betrayed their advocacy of loving tolerance, and revealed the rigidity and arrogance of their elitist "union-fundamentalism."

A few months ago (May, 2004) I wrote an article about a "mutant tulip" being a "heretical weed" in the theological flower garden. A former theology professor, who still makes his living as a "Christian leader," reacted to my references to "heresy." He explained in his correspondence that the Bible did not ever refer to "heresy," and therefore he did not consider it proper to refer to anything as "heretical." Evidently, he also thinks we should be "beyond heresy," which is consistent with his postmodernist sympathies and affiliation with the above mentioned school of thought.

Acknowledging "heresy"

Contrary to the declarations of the former theology professor, the Bible does indeed refer to "heresy" and "heretical." The English word "heresy" is transliterated from the Greek word *hairesis*, and the English word "heretical" from the Greek word *hairetikos*. Both of these words are found in the Greek New Testament. These words were derived from the root word *haireomai,* meaning, "to choose" from differing alternatives. In classical Greek usage, *hairesis* was often used to refer to a "school of thought with a chosen ideology." Jewish rabbinic usage similarly identified variant "schools of thought," such as the Pharisees and Sadducees, as *haireseis*, referring to differing "parties" or "sects" of Jewish thinking. Historical references in the Acts of the Apostles employ *hairesis* in the typical rabbinic manner, referring to the Pharisees (Acts 15:5; 26:5), the Sadducees (Acts 5:17), and even to the Christians as being a separate "school of thought" or "sect" from traditional Judaism (Acts 24:5,14; 28:22).

Pauline correspondence seems to develop the Greek word *hairesis* in a distinctive Christian usage. When Paul identifies heresies, *haireseis*, as "works of the flesh" (Gal. 5:20), he seems to be referring to expressions of selfish motivational patterns and self-oriented choices of involvement with divisive and schismatic schools of thought. The mention of "enmities, strife, disputes, and dissensions" provides a contextual clue to his thinking. In his epistle to the Corinthians, having previously referred to divisive schisms, (*schismata*) (I Cor. 1:10; 11:18), Paul explains, "For there must be heresies (*haireseis*) among you, in order that those who are genuine may be recognized" (I Cor. 11:19). He seems to be explaining that divergent schools of thought provide an occasion for spiritual discernment of that which is genuine as opposed to that which is aberrant or illegitimate. The adjective, *hairetikos*, is used in Paul's letter to Titus, when he advises, "As for a man who is heretical (*hairetikon*), after admonishing him once or twice, having nothing more to do with him" (Titus 3:10). One who engages in a selfish and sectarian school of thought that is not conducive to the unity of the church should be warned, and if he does not desist should be disassociated.

The singular Petrine usage of *hairesis* concurs with the Pauline usage. "There will be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies (*haireseis*), even

denying the Master who bought them" (II Peter 2:1). False-teachers, as contrasted with truth-teachers, will clandestinely introduce self-chosen schools of thought that are detrimental and destructive to the church and its gospel message.

Paul and Peter always consider *hairesis* in the context of the loving unity of the *ecclesia*, the Church. The collective "Body of Christ" (Eph. 1:23; Col. 1:18,24) is the singular expression of the singularly unique Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. God has delivered a foundational teaching through the apostle's (Eph. 2:20; 3:5) teaching and writing that provides a genuine and true gospel message of the salvific reconciliation of God and man. Those who would selfishly choose a contrary school of thought, and develop such into a counter society are "heretical," as they are engaged in "heresy."

In the context of the Greek city-states, those whose self-chosen interests caused them to have inadequate concern for the unity and welfare of the whole assembly (*ecclesia*) were identified as the *idiotes*, the idiots whose individuated concern led to unconcern for the greater society. When the *idiotes* began to actively disrupt and divide the unity of the social assembly (*ecclesia*), they were identified as schismatics (*schismatikoi*). These were underlying characteristics of the heretics (*hairetikoi*) that are referred to in the New Testament literature.

The church (*ecclesia*), however, is more than just a social gathering like those called-out for a town meeting in the Greek city-states. The church is a result of God's self-revelation of Himself in His Son, Jesus Christ, who by resurrection from the dead lives as the risen Lord in receptive believers. Collectively these Christians form a resurrection community, which is the living "Body of Christ," the church. There can be no other society or school of thought that legitimately challenges what God has singularly ordained through His Son. As the "last Adam" (*eschatos Adam* – I Cor. 15:45), God's Son, Jesus, is the last word (*eschatos logos*) of God to man for these "last times" (*eschatos chronon* – I Pet. 1:20) and "last days" (*eschatos hemeron* – Acts 2:17; Heb. 1:2). The church stands unique as the *eschatos* community of Christ's resurrection life. All legitimate Christian references to "heresy" must contextually retain the ecclesiological and eschatological understanding of the singularity of Christ and His Body, the Church, and the singular gospel message entrusted to the church.

Identifying heresy

"Heresy" has become a very distasteful and loathsome word for many, due in part to its misuse and abuse throughout Christian history. There is no doubt that murderous inquisitions and merciless witch-hunts were means by which church leaders leveraged a conformity that disallowed dissent and variance. Thousands upon thousands of faithful Christian believers were martyred without due cause. It is completely understandable why society-at-large conjures up negative and pejorative images of high-handed dogmatism and narrow-minded bigotry when they think of "heresy." So much so, that to charge another with "heresy" is equivalent to a "hate-crime" in the minds of some. The secular backlash to religious history has concluded that there is no place for designations of "heresy" in a modern pluralistic society.

Christians, however, who remain true to the scriptural standard and the essential traditions of their past, maintain that the determination of "heresy" has a legitimate place in the context of the Church of Jesus Christ. The identification of "heresy" must be carefully and cautiously conducted, however. We are not free to call anyone who does not agree with our opinions and interpretations a "heretic." Those who are non-conformist and non-traditional, even non-denominational, are not necessarily heretical. We must beware of a radical conservatism that

seeks to retain the status quo and disallows for novelty, dissent, and change. There will always be an inevitable clash of ideas and interpretations in Christian theology, wherein we must allow for great latitude of differentiation as we agree to disagree agreeably. An old adage, attributed both to Augustine and Rupert Meldenius, states, "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, love." The difficulty then comes in determining what is "essential" and what is "non-essential."

Consistent with the brief word study of *hairesis* above, we can proceed to note that heresy is linguistically and historically defined as a self-serving school of thought that threatens the loving unity of the Church because the tenets thereof are contrary to the catholic understanding of the gospel message of the redemptive reconciliation of God and man in a relational salvation enacted by God's grace and received through faith. Thus defined, it is much more than personal disputations and disagreements about propositional truth statements. Christianity is not essentially an epistemological belief-system of ideological premises, for God's Truth is a Person (John 8:32,36; 14:6), the living Lord, Jesus Christ, encountered relationally by His indwelling ontological presence in a receptive believer. This does not negate, however, the fact that there is an inviolable core and corpus of thought and teaching that serves as a foundation of the Christian faith. Christianity is an historical faith, the historical events of which and the theological realities of which can and must be articulated in accurate statements, defensible by *apologia* for veracity, validity, and legitimacy. Herein is the basis for Christian identification and designation of "heresy."

Determining "heresy"

How, then, are variant and aberrant schools of thought to be determined and identified as "heresies"? The following criteria may serve as general categories for the determination of orthodoxy, contrariety to which should produce "red flags" warning of possible heresy.

(1) ***Scriptural standard.*** In all the major communities of the Christian faith the scriptures are regarded as an objective and definitive standard for the determination of normative Christian teaching. Although Protestants have elevated the scriptures with an undue emphasis of *sola scriptura* that regards the Bible as the infallible word of God equivalent to the living Word (John 1:1,14), we must still recognize that Jesus declared that the scriptures "bear witness to Me" (John 5:39), and "cannot be broken" (John 10:35). To the Sadducees, Jesus explained, "You are mistaken, not understanding the scriptures" (Matt. 22:29). Paul's regard for the scriptural standard is clear: "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (II Timothy 3:16).

(2) ***Gospel consistency.*** The scriptural writings do not address every pertinent detail of every Christian subject. Christians are called upon to use spiritual discernment and sanctified common sense in determining the consistency of any teaching with gospel message of God's grace in redemption, reconciliation, and restoration. Paul anathematized the heretical false teachers who had invaded Galatia, and chastised the Galatian believers for "so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel, which is not really another gospel, but some are disturbing you, and want to distort the gospel of Christ" (Gal. 1:6,7).

(3) ***Creedal formulation.*** We must avoid the arrogant and foolish tendency to ignore the precision with which the early Christians sought to formulate the Christian message in succinct statements of creedal orthodoxy. Jude encouraged his readers to "contend for the faith which was once and for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). It is extremely important that we recognize the reliable expressions of essential truths that are found in the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Chalcedonian Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. Those who claim to espouse "no creed but Christ," fail to understand how the early saints painfully sought to explain Christ in creedal statements.

(4) ***Ecclesiastical consensus.*** The accumulated wisdom of twenty centuries of Christian tradition is not to be rejected. The past and present consensus of the community of faith must be given due consideration, for Jesus declared, "the gates of Hades shall not overpower it" (Matt. 16:18). There is an essential and catholic, i.e. universal, confession of faith to be found in Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and Protestantism pertaining to the Trinity, the incarnation of Christ, the redemptive efficacy of the crucifixion and resurrection, the spiritual regeneration of salvation, and the importance of the church. We must align ourselves with what all Christians in all times and in all places have believed.

These criteria should serve as generalized guidelines for determining orthodoxy and the contrary heresies of variant schools of thought.

The necessity of addressing "heresy"

There are many categories of dialectic wherein divergent themes are brought into a balanced tension of both/and, but there are other issues where an either/or dichotomy must be posited. The unique singularity of the gospel of Jesus Christ as the sole means of reconciliation with God presents a polarized dichotomy between truth and error, between orthodoxy and heresy. When Jesus told His disciples, "No man comes unto the Father, but through Me" (John 14:6), the Christian singularity was declared. All spiritual reality that does not derive from Him must be exposed and identified as the false error that it necessarily is. The dichotomy of the "spirit of truth and the spirit of error" (I John 4:6) must be made evident.

Definition is often achieved by awareness of the opposite. For example, we know darkness as the alternative of light, death as the antithesis of life, false as the counter of truth, and heresy as the repudiation of orthodoxy. Any attempt to define one by the absence of the other, known as "definition by privation," does not provide a legitimate definition of the opposite, for to explain what something *is not* cannot explain what it *is*, providing only a vacuous indefinition of nothingness.

There are many who would view heresy as "much ado about nothing," for their denial and rejection of the singular Self-revelation of God in His Son, Jesus Christ, does not establish an orthodox confession of faith by which to establish an antithesis in heresy. Others, who consider the gospel of Jesus to be but one self-chosen ideological option among many alternatives, likewise have no basis for understanding the ultimate antithesis of the universe. To deny the legitimacy of "heresy" denies the possibility of Christian definition and the plausibility of the foundational realities of Christianity.

The humanistic-based pluralism that chants, "It doesn't matter what anyone believes. We seek peace and unity at all costs," will find that they have purchased a contrived ecumenism constructed of pious platitudes about peaceful coexistence that will eventually implode upon itself as the maggots of individual selfishness gut the social facade they have created. When we travel "beyond belief" and "beyond heresy" we slide into the relativized slough of meaninglessness that is "beyond Christianity" and "beyond hope." Such a nihilistic school of thought is the ultimate expression of "heresy." Those who stand for nothing will fall for anything.

What a person believes is of supreme importance. What we believe is integrally connected to the deeper reality of spiritual being and character within the core of our spirits. On the other hand, what we believe facilitates and sets in motion how we behave, and how we allow the character of the spiritual being within to be expressed in our behavior. Mankind can never develop "beyond belief," for being, belief, and behavior are the *modus operandi* of our created humanness.

The necessity of addressing "heresy" is implicit within the singularity of the reality of the living Lord Jesus. To know Jesus is to take a stand against all that is the spirit of antichrist (I John 4:3). If we are "beyond belief" and "beyond heresy," then Christianity is beyond any meaningful message and plausible presence of the living Christ for the fallen world today.

Conclusion

We must be very cautious about drawing arbitrary lines and declaring a particular idea or person as "heretical." To be scriptural in our use of these terms, we must carefully evaluate a school of thought and the teaching thereof, and consider whether this group of people is violating the central core of the gospel and thereby the unity of the church in what they teach.

On the other hand, to fail to draw the line between orthodoxy and heresy, to disassociate from such schools of thought, and to warn people of the eternal perils of error, would be to consign them to the vacuity of false hope in believing that man can safely be "beyond belief" and "beyond heresy."

To propose that any genuine expression of Christianity is "beyond belief" as Pagels and others have done, and thereby to surmise that we are "beyond heresy," having no basis to distinguish accuracy and inaccuracy, truth and falsity, orthodoxy and heresy, is to misrepresent historic Christianity. The foundational core of historic Christianity must be believed and advocated by any who would legitimately call themselves "Christians."

FOOTNOTE:

1   Pagels, Elaine, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*. New York: Vintage Books. 2004.